

Traversing the Known: Spatiality and the Gaze in Pre & Post Renaissance Theatre

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Recent years have seen a wealth of new writings on the theatre of the English Renaissance, writings that have radically altered the field. In particular, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Bakhtinian perspectives have rendered all notions of an Elizabethan World Picture untenable. We recognise instead that a plurality of discourses and interpretative positions is a feature of all cultures. Cultures are intrinsically heterogeneous bodies, with residual, dominant and emergent ideologies augmented by a host of less evident discursive positions, positions both of resistance and reaction. But this is relative, and what is true of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is less true of England at other times. The Renaissance was a unique period, poised as it was between late Medieval discursive formations and emerging modern ones, and the contest between these caused the mechanisms of ideological reproduction to function less comprehensively, thereby opening up spaces for the articulation of more marginal views. While the societies of fifteenth and eighteenth century England, those which bracket the Renaissance, certainly encompassed diversity, monolithic epistemological structures were more firmly in place, and there were correspondingly fewer opportunities for utterances outside the dominant conceptual frame.

This essay will therefore examine the conceptual frames of these two periods as they emerge within theatre. It will do so by concentrating on two dramas, *The Castle of Perseverance* of c. 1425 and Congreve's *The Way of the World* of 1700. Rather than providing a literary analysis, however, we shall focus on their codes of spatiality, for, far from being merely 'functional,' space is always one of the primary mechanisms by which theatre frames its meanings, and so offers specific positions for the social subjects who comprise its audience.

Spatial codes constituted an immensely important signifying resource in late medieval England. The customary arrangement of structures in the village, 'borough' or city—the central position of the dwellings of civil dignitaries and the wealthy, or of the church with its eminently visible spire—had a utilitarian

dimension but, like all social products, was shot through with relations of power and conveyed obvious symbolic meaning. Similar codes operate in modern cities but the small scale of fifteenth century built environments meant that such symbolic geography was constantly presented to the eye, its meanings continuously reiterated. Moreover, whereas in modern societies the political dimension of such codes tends to go unacknowledged, being antithetical to their 'democratic' ethos, in the fifteenth century emphatic display was integral to the operation of power.¹ Church statuary and stained glass, and manuscript illumination employed allied compositional codes so that, despite the emergence of so-called 'bourgeois realism' in the late fourteenth century² and its melding with existing conventions, the dispersal of bodies in religious representation was still governed more by symbolic relativity than verisimilitude. Indeed, England in the fifteenth century was busily eschewing the new 'realism,' returning for a period to the older, emblematic artistic regime.³

This is equally evident in the dispersal of living bodies. At the very least each Christian would have been exposed to spatial symbology every week while attending a secular church service. The priest's procession along the aisle—preceded by bell and cross, followed by lay attendants—was a visual representation of his theological position: before the flock, behind the tangible symbols of the intangible divine, an intermediary between the spiritual and the temporal. Such arrangements are by no means incidental. Both theologically and institutionally, the Catholic Church was at pains to assert that one could only gain access to God via mediating agencies, either the concentric circles of the church hierarchy itself or else the pantheon of saints that the Church iconised. The priest's place in the procession as bridge between flock and cross, secular and divine, constituted a spatial representation of his place in the divine order.

Such rituals also signify in a less imagistic, more concretely spatial way, however, and we can best illuminate this process using Michel Foucault's principle of the gaze.⁴ The Foucaultian gaze is an optical arrangement that offers vantages for viewer and viewed, and, in so doing, positions both parties within those 'procedures' of knowledge and power that determine the discursive formations of society as a whole. The panopticon prisons of the early nineteenth century, for example, were ostensibly designed to enable gaolers to keep prisoners under constant observation. But the effect was more than simply functional, for both prisoner and gaoler were thereby placed within a particular geometry of knowledge. The relationship between them was an analogue of that operating between scientists or rationalists and the objects/phenomena they scrutinised; the prisoner became 'known,' rendered an entity within the prevailing discourse of criminology, while the gaoler was constituted as his/her knower. Thus for Foucault the panoptical gaze reproduced the epistemological mechanism

that shaped Enlightenment discourse as a whole, and which was the epoch's key strategy of power. The act of penal 'surveillance' effectively granted subject positions to all its participants; aware that they are being watched, prisoners act as prisoners, adopting the proffered discursive identity, while the gaoler similarly enacts the social and psychic procedures of the watcher.

Thus institutionalised forms of the gaze reproduce not ideologies but the epistemological mechanisms that shape a society's ideologies, thereby offering positions within those mechanisms for both parties, the viewer being as 'placed' as the viewed. Foucault's concern is with the modern period and the panoptical gaze which is specific to it. But the gaze as a principle—an optical 'technology' that functions as an instrument of knowledge and power—has a wider application. It is particularly useful when examining behavioural decorum like the church service because it allows us to include the laity (the viewers) as a signifying element, one that signifies to itself. While delivering the sermon, the priest's separation from the congregation by direction of gaze and by distance expresses in a direct way the relations of authority that pertained to that space. The spatio-visual relationship is reciprocal; the priest is the overseer of his flock's piety, with the right to monitor and the power to pronounce (i.e. to place within the associated theological discourse), but he only occupies that position insofar as he is observed to. The priest not only sees, he is seen to see, so that in this visual geometry all participants are informed of their relative positions.

In the secular church service we can discern two spatial codes, both symbolic 'cartographic' dispersal and proximity, used as part of a particular form of gaze—and this in a space where metaphorical interpretation was the sanctioned norm. A third code, elevation, was equally central to Christian representation. Indeed, elevation is especially useful for our purposes, for it can be used to illustrate the function of spatiality in historically specific operations of power. It was at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that questions over the doctrine of Transubstantiation, the transformation of the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, were finally settled. During the last decades of the twelfth century, and particularly in France, fierce debate took place over precisely when Transubstantiation occurred. Was the bread transformed immediately after the words were spoken over it, i.e. before the wine? Or were both transmuted together when verbal consecration was completed? Pope Innocent III settled the issue doctrinally, but the change was accompanied by an alteration in the semiotics of the secular and monastic services. Increasingly, after 1215, all sacred elements, the vestments as well as the bread and wine, would be lifted after consecration—offering them to the Father and exhibiting them for adoration, certainly, but also marking their transition from a material to a symbolic state. Thus the establishment of a doctrine was marked by a material signifier; when the

bread was lifted above the plane of the laity, through the intermediary level of the priest, it became symbolic of the divine, and Transubstantiation was deemed to have occurred.

This illustrates the function of spatiality not merely as a sign but as part of a Foucaultian politics, a technology of knowledge inextricable from its effects of power. The Fourth Lateran Council is perhaps best remembered for Innocent's crusade against heresy and his inception of rules for the organisation and management of religious orders. By such means were laid the foundations of that more institutionalised Catholicism, with Rome as its executive centre, which would develop over subsequent centuries. But this institutionalisation of rule and doctrine is inseparable from the parallel standardisation of the service and its signs. The newly sanctioned spatial semiotic was integral to doctrinal hegemony, and to the political centralisation it effected.

Elevation was, of course, always a widely understood sign. Although pulpits and church pews (creating differences in height) did not come into widespread use until the late sixteenth century, elevation as an emblem of status was commonly experienced in the ritual abasement before figures of religious authority. But in fact we need not restrict ourselves to the church or to theological meanings at all, since spatial codes would have featured in events like the Royal Entry and, more commonly, in the day to day exchange between classes and within occupational hierarchies. Sociality itself signifies and a society's behavioural decorum is legible to all who use it.

The importance of such signifying practices becomes evident when one considers the very limited possibilities for representation available. While it is true that from the mid-fourteenth century there was a growth in the use of English as a literary language,⁵ a language read for pleasure, who had access to it? The hand-written, 'shop-made' book was an item very few could afford, and even after Caxton began printing in 1476 the price of texts remained prohibitive. Literacy had improved over the previous two hundred years but outside London it was still almost exclusively a skill of the clergy and the mercantile and landed classes, those able to attend elementary and grammar schools.⁶ Over the same period we see a growth in the ownership of paintings but again this is accounted for by a newly affluent and aspiring urban mercantile class, and for the rest there was only a crude technology for reproducing pictorial images. Most of the population would only have experienced pictorial representation on a regular basis in the church and, to a lesser degree, in urban architecture. Church iconography was ideologically potent, certainly, and was displayed in ceremonial situations that made its significance doubly apparent, but most people were exposed to it for only a few hours a week. The real political effect of religious imagery would have

been severely limited unless its representational strategies were augmented by practices in society at large, its principles reproduced in other spaces.

This means that fifteenth century culture per se provided few practical opportunities for 'hailing' or interpellating the social subject in an Althusserian sense,⁷ few means of offering positions of subjectivity that could secure the populace ideologically. Moreover the sections of society for whom such positioning was most urgent, the peasant and artisan classes, were the least accessible. They neither bought books nor owned paintings and, in addition, possessed their own, oppositional culture in the form of Carnival⁸: a celebration of the cycle of seasons which emphasised materiality and ephemerality, and so was inherently critical of the transcendence accorded the church and secular state. In this restricted representational landscape the various forms of spatiality offered a way of confirming—literally re-producing—the individual's place in the existing order, a way that was universally understood.

Spatial signs possessed a particular potency, however, because they functioned metaphorically—because elevation, proximity/alignment, and symbolic patterning were, and are, allegorical representations of real social and political relations. Allegory was, of course, the dominant aesthetic mode of this culture, featuring in all art forms. In drama it emerges in the Pauline *figura* that provides the sequential logic of the Corpus Christi cycles or 'mysteries'; the reoccurrence of actions (the slaying of Abel prefiguring Christ's Crucifixion, Lazarus prefiguring His Resurrection) that were both predictions of the future and yet real in their own time, indicating a perspective on history from outside time, God's own.⁹ The castle itself in *Perseverance* was a very common allegorical motif, its symbolic value deriving from those layers of defence that the pious Christian or ardent courtly lover must overcome. But allegory's significance for drama is more fundamental than this, for it is also the founding figure of the medieval world view as expressed in the hierarchical pattern of the Chain of Being.

Although the status of the Chain of Being as the all-pervading medieval paradigm has been brought into question, nevertheless its importance as an ideological trope cannot be overlooked. From a semiotic viewpoint, the Chain of Being is a model sign system in that the value and meaning of any element is entirely dependent on its place relative to all other elements; its alignment with those which share its stratum, its position above or below the rest. Identity is a product of an element's deferral to all others and, as is typical of such systems, ultimately defers to a sign or Logos that guarantees the system from without—in this case, God the Father.

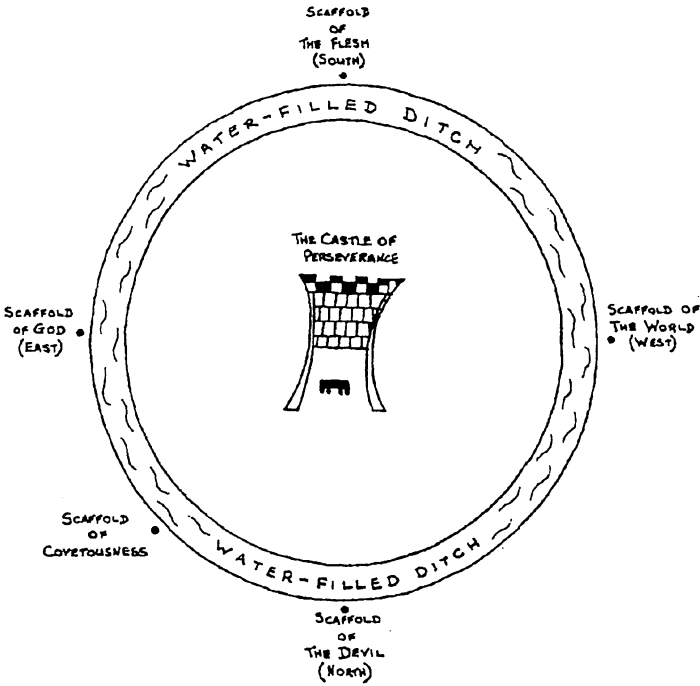
This means that identity, viewed in the modern period as an internal quality, is here a function of external relationships, so that the system rests upon

its deferential structure. It may appear that ideological matrices of this kind are potentially unstable since, like a house of cards, a shift in one element will bring the whole complex into crisis. In fact they are stable, and very cost-effective in political terms, because they are self-policing; one's position is dependent on the continued subjection of those beneath, so each individual has an investment in maintaining the whole. Thus an entire system of political relations is reproduced in everyday social exchange at all levels, ensuring its continuance.

For our purposes there are two key qualities to formations of this kind. First, they are inherently spatial. It was one's 'distance' from God or from brute animals that signified value in theology, just as it was one's proximity to the king or to the peasant that mattered in the analogous socio-political discourse. Both systems, the Chain of Being and spatiality, feature the same species of deferential structure, enabling spatial conventions to act as direct metaphors for the world order. All this required was an act of interpretation—and this is the second quality. Medieval allegory is the narrative representation of an abstract, celestial order that by definition cannot assume a material form. To read allegory one must transpose the material signifier into its abstract signified to reconstruct the absent system in its entirety. Allegory therefore offers an interpretative logic, a logic of *transposition*, that overlays ideological formations with social ones. The allegorical symbol is not merely a technique of representation, but encodes the very relationship that was deemed to exist between the celestial and earthly planes. It is these two qualities—a similar deferential structure and a logic of transposition—that allowed the spatial positioning of spectators to effect their corresponding placement in the ideological formations of the medieval world.

The social subject in fifteenth century England, then, was experienced at reading spatial codes as they appeared in a range of cultural practices, both artistic and behavioural. Space was a medium in which ideology found immediate expression, nowhere more so than in the art form to which it lends itself particularly well, theatre.

Fifteenth century theatre was a theatre of movement and this is particularly true of *The Castle of Perseverance*. As Michael Kelly notes of the play's central protagonist, "When Mankind goes to Confession he literally *goes to* Confession, who embraces him and welcomes him to the state of grace."¹⁰ With this play we are fortunate enough to have a 'plan' for production, here reproduced in a simplified, modern form:



The plan, then, seems to propose that the play was staged in the round. Around the perimeter were placed five raised scaffolds, occupied by the five personifications of this psychomachic drama. Another raised construction, the castle itself, sat in the playing area's centre, and beneath it lay the bed from which Mankind arose after his 'birth.' It was between these six positions that he walked, ascending the constructions themselves at certain points in the narrative. Since the publication of Richard Southern's book on the subject in 1957,¹¹ there has been much disagreement about how the play is likely to have been staged, how the 'Perseverance Plan' should be interpreted in detailed, practical terms. But however it is interpreted, Mankind's movement—his crossing of *space*—is symbolically weighted. As he walks towards the scaffolds of God or the Devil, proceeds along the paths that run between the castle at the centre of the playing area and the five points along its periphery, he inevitably invokes the code of proximity with which the audience would have been familiar, aligning himself with one or other of the divine and diabolical agencies that determine his life and spiritual status.

This observation is of limited significance until one places it in its cultural context, for the movement reveals much about the medieval conception

of the human subject. As Catherine Belsey has noted,¹² Mankind is singularly lacking in volition—indeed, lacking any significant internality in which *will* might be located. He exerts no control over his fate but is merely a cursor to the lines of force which emanate from the play's theological personifications. He actually *consists* of his position in relation to them, a position that alters throughout the narrative, as he aligns himself with God one moment and Flesh the next. This is the kind of structure we observed in the Chain of Being, with identity as a function of external relations, and it is supported by the dramatic action. The play's resolution has been the source of some discussion. Mankind is ultimately redeemed not through repentance but by the intervention of God, which is arguably at variance with the principles of Catholic theology because it relieves the Christian of free will. But it is part and parcel of a world view in which identity is conferred by reference to other bodies in a transcendent pattern, an ideology reproduced in the play's use of space. Viewed thus, the human subject is less a subject than an object, never fully visible to itself, reduced to existential incapacity without the intervention of the divine.

Clearly the code of proximity is here dependent upon another, that of the horizontal dispersal of bodies and positions to form a symbolic plan or 'map.' This is perhaps more difficult for a modern observer to appreciate. Since the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a different spatial paradigm has dominated, an empirical and 'portable' one founded upon Rationalism and validated as the viewpoint of the Cartesian Individual. Knowledge in this later paradigm is derived from a 'bi-polar' relationship, with Phenomena and the Individual at opposite ends of the epistemological axis. For the fifteenth century, however, the symbolic plan was more resonant because of the pre-empiricist importance of place (to which the social subject always has a fixed relation), and it features in the play as 'real' geography: the position of God's scaffold in the East, where lays Eden and the Holy Land, and which is the direction from which Christ was to appear on the Day of Judgement; the Devil in his traditional, cold North. Of more specific significance is the fact that the plan itself presupposes the spectator's ability to appreciate 'cartographic' spatial patterning despite its not being presented to his/her eye. The fifteenth century, pre-Galilean spectator required only a notional 'view' and could be positioned within a specular relationship without being central to it.

Where the spectator is concerned, however, the play's use of elevation is most important of all. In his book *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*,¹³ Robert Weimann argues that the Renaissance stage inherited from medieval theatre two kinds of space, those of the Locus and the Platea. The Locus is the 'illusionistic' space, the space of symbolic translation where the actor stands in for the character and the place itself for another location. It is therefore

conceptually separated from the social space of the audience. Being thus separated, it is able to deal in concepts of a different order like the abstractions of theology, which require symbolic representation because they cannot be given a direct, material form. The Platea, in contrast, is not conceptually separated and employs the audience's usual epistemology, so that there is no symbolic translation and the world is read in its everyday material form.

Weimann's theory can be extended to all theatre, and when this is done it becomes apparent that the conceptual separation of the Locus is often accompanied by a physical partition in the form of a raised platform or, in modern theatres, a proscenium arch stage. These act as 'framing signifiers,' indications that the action is to be viewed as removed from social space, so requiring a different interpretative posture. In *The Castle of Perseverance* we see Mankind either elevated on a scaffold or the castle, or else occupying the same level as the audience. That is, he has either ascended to the plane of theological abstraction or remains on the level of the audience and its material world, the level where divine agencies never appear in their pure form but wind invisibly through the fabric of everyday life.

As we have seen, the relationship between the material and divine orders is allegorical in the medieval world view, requiring an act of transposition. It has been argued that, whereas the mysteries chronicle the appearance of God in the world, moralities like *The Castle of Perseverance* stage the Catholic abstraction itself.¹⁴ The code of elevation as it is employed in this play suggests that this explanation is incomplete. Mankind's movement from ground level to scaffold illustrates the meeting of material and abstract. Like the sacred elements of a Catholic service, Mankind's elevation signifies his transformation from a material to a sacred, symbolic state, so that in his ascent the interfacing of the invisible spiritual realm with the tangible world of the body—the relationship proposed by Catholic allegory—is given a material representation. The most important point to note, however, is that this is not conveyed by an 'image' that must be decoded by the spectator, but by a spatial arrangement in which the spectator is actually placed. At ground level, the spectator's separation from the heights of the scaffold reproduces his/her temporal status and subjection to the spiritual, a spatial configuration corresponding to the divine one, and this employs the same transpositional logic as the medieval world view itself.

The cultural position of *The Castle of Perseverance* is relatively unproblematic because, situated near the close of the late medieval period, it encodes that gaze-form which had already established itself as culturally central. Our choice of *The Way of the World* is made on a somewhat different basis. As Michel de Certeau notes,¹⁵ the kind of Foucaultian perspective we have employed

here is a necessarily retrospective one. It involves a “surgical procedure,” isolating from an initial plurality of mechanisms that “microphysics of power” that would only rise to dominance in subsequent years. Similarly, within *The Way of the World* we see embedded a gaze-form which was, in 1700, only one of a range of epistemological possibilities. It is only from our own perspective, a historical one, that its eventual triumph as the key conceptual trope of the modern period seems inevitable.

The three spatial codes evident in *The Castle of Perseverance* and, as we have seen, in fifteenth century England as a whole, enable us to partially reconstruct the form of gaze that dominated the late medieval period. But this paradigm was itself to be challenged. During the Renaissance, England was poised at the cusp of massive social change and, as a consequence, a variety of new epistemological mechanisms arose. We can elicit the ultimate victor of the ensuing struggle using the example of Congreve’s *The Way of the World*. In doing so, however, our perspective is necessarily retrospective, for Congreve’s play expresses in embryo those mechanisms which would come to shape the discourse, the knowledges, of the historical modern period.

The opening of Congreve’s play shows two characters, Mirabell and Fainall, talking and playing cards. They are largely indistinguishable and their conversation appears genial, but the card game is a metaphor; each is probing the other under the guise of friendship, trying to discern what the other knows of his sexual liaisons without revealing his own ‘hand.’ The image is repeated in the second scene, with two female characters, Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, engaged in similarly covert probing. As the play proceeds the characters pair up, Mirabell finding an ally in Mrs. Fainall, while Fainall himself conspires with Mrs. Marwood, so that the initial card game evolves into a kind of ‘contract bridge’ of intrigue, each couple trying to outwit their opponents by strategically withholding and revealing secrets.

Ultimately Mirabell will emerge as *The Way of the World*’s hero and Fainall as its villain (insofar as such terms can be applied within this play’s supremely pragmatic moral framework) and their relations are revealed retrospectively to have been antagonistic from the outset. Intrigue and secrecy are, of course, major components of most Restoration comedies. But secrecy has a special significance here, for the true nature of the characters and their relationships, along with most of the plot, will not be made clear until halfway through this remarkably ‘modern’ piece. In William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* of 1675 the many plots are made very apparent to the audience. Indeed, in Aphra Behn’s *The Lucky Chance* of 1686, the old convention of having the central protagonist outline the plot in soliloquy at the play’s opening is still in use. In Congreve’s play, however, plot and motive remain hidden from all, including,

most importantly, the audience. The play assumes that spectators will hold their need for information about characters in abeyance, an assumption founded upon a new, shared view of the subject. In *The Way of the World* we are presented with characters whose internality is so profound that it can be hidden, at variance not only with the social exterior presented to other characters, but also with that presented to the auditorium. Thus our ignorance at the play's opening, the fact that the characters' actions can only be understood retrospectively, rests upon the very image of the psychologically profound Humanist Individual, that development upon the Cartesian subject which was gaining great cultural currency by the late seventeenth century, and which would become discursively central in the years that followed.

This model of the subject is reiterated throughout the play, where even the stock comic characters undergo change and reveal good qualities as well as bad, displaying a 'roundedness' lacking in most of their dramatic ancestors. Equally, the drama's very pragmatism—its flawed heroes and murky morality—speaks of a view of the social as far from divine, as a purely temporal order posed against an inner self which alone harbours the sacred. But the assumptions of humanist individualism are perhaps most convincingly demonstrated in *The Way of the World*'s conclusion. To today's audience the plot's resolution may appear contrived; Mrs. Fainall's fortune is ultimately revealed to have been safe from the clutches of her grasping husband all along, because she has placed it contractually in the hands of Mirabell, an agreement arranged before the play begins and alluded to only enigmatically. But this is appropriate to a play in which only the characters themselves are fully cognisant of their secrets, where the audience is required to operate with limited knowledge of motivation and past actions, such as they would possess in everyday social exchange.

It is particularly significant that the play's resolution is achieved by legal means, however, for it was written at a time when the contract was emerging as the dominant trope of social and political theory. Prior to the English Civil War, political discourse largely construed social relationships as given, part of a world order designed by God and handed down from antiquity. But the post Civil War philosophies of Hobbes and, especially, Locke in their different ways viewed the social as a compact, freely entered into. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. Published in 1689, argued that civil societies must be founded on consent. Whereas tyrannies are built upon coercion, true 'political' societies are created when rational human beings form associations to further their own best interests, handing their natural sovereignty to a representative in order to secure their own life, liberty and estates.

It is this political logic that is proposed as a model for social functioning in *The Way of the World*. Fainall is like the Lockian tyrant, seeking to obtain his wife's estate by machiavellian intrigue. But he is thwarted by a legal contract, an association between his wife and Mirabell, under the agreed terms of which Mrs. Fainall hands her inherent self-sovereignty to another in order that her property be protected. In fact, the contract is the founding figure of the play, for its plot negotiates a labyrinth of true and false agreements; of property, certainly, but most importantly of the 'state' of marriage. Perhaps the most emblematic scene in this regard is that in which Mirabell and Mrs. Millament negotiate the terms of their marriage. Their dialogue is comic, and constitutes a displaced sexual banter, but it nevertheless states openly the terms on which each will permit the union to proceed. Unlike the Fainall's, Millament and Mirabell's marriage is to be a consensual estate, a compact in which all rights and limits of power are agreed at the outset.

Congreve's play is a landmark in that it is the first English drama to fully reflect a variety of ideological developments. The new discourses of Empirical Rationalism and Science had as their prerequisite a stable, autonomous individual who required no intervention from external agencies to gain objective knowledge of phenomena—exactly the kind of individual figured in the play. This notion finds its ally not only in Lockian but also Hobbesian philosophy. In *The Leviathan* Hobbes argued that society was man-made, imposed in order to forestall anarchy, a view which centres human internality by rendering the external inessential, no longer derived from God. The new, concomitant discourses of citizenship and contractual law pictured the subject not as conforming to established social relationships but as creating new ones, building a consensual society, a view that requires that internal and external selves be regarded as separate. Even Calvinist theology validated the new view for, in opposing the old Catholic hierarchy by placing the Soul in an unmediated relationship to God, it rendered humanity's internal self the only repository of the divine on Earth. In fact all these discourses provided complements for the emergent notion of the Humanist Individual, jointly placing the subject at the epistemological centre of the world.

Most significant from our viewpoint, however, is that this new conception of the subject finds its corollary in a method of staging. *The Way of the World* was first performed at the Lincoln's Inn Field Theatre which used a picture frame stage, the forerunner of the modern proscenium arch. Although the acting would have taken place on the forestage, the frame as backdrop would still have functioned to focus the spectator's gaze, containing it perspectively. By establishing sight lines to contrive a single perspective on the action (a bi-polar relationship, similar to that of the scientific observer to phenomena) the picture

frame presumes its spectator to exemplify the unified subjectivity of the Individual at the same time as encoding an empiricism that is the Individual's complement. The flat 'plane of action' described by the frame, and by the painted screens behind it, addresses the spectator perpendicular to it as a bourgeois subject, a stable, autonomous viewer whose vision validates and reflects the conception of the human subject embodied in the play's own characters. This, then, is a very different but no less specific form of gaze, a specular mechanism which shapes/is shaped by its culture's orders of knowledge and which situates both viewer and viewed, spectator and character, within it.

This later form of gaze provides a point of comparison for *The Castle of Perseverance*. As we have seen, in the fifteenth century play the character of Mankind is defined externally, a cursor for the lines of force emanating from theological agencies. The Perseverance Plan indicates that the playing area is composed of concentric rings; castle, moat, and the circle that is plotted by the scaffolds. The location of the moat has been the subject of debate, Southern suggesting that it was dug outside the scaffold ring while Natalie Crohn Schmitt¹⁶ and others argue that it lay within, but this makes no difference for our purpose. Nor does it matter whether the audience stood inside the playing circle, or outside and all around it, or at one side looking at the action from a single direction. As we noted, dramatic movement through space takes place along lines that run from the castle at the centre to five points of the compass. This means that wherever a spectator stands the action will at some time *traverse* his/her sight. It will move towards or away from him/her, cross his/her field of vision diagonally. We saw that the picture frame stage implicitly posits the bourgeois Individual as viewing subject by offering a perspective perpendicular to the frame's plane of action. In contrast the *Perseverance* plan proffers a perspective that transcends anything the spectator could adopt. It does not describe a single plane of action but a 360° panorama, requiring a sight line that borders on omniscience. As Mankind ascends to the level of the scaffold he enters a dimension of theological abstraction that permeates his own but which he cannot know, a view representative of medieval theology and reproduced in the spectator's visual experience.

This is not to say that medieval staging was so crude as to inadvertently obstruct one's view of the action, the very opposite. The traversing of the spectator's gaze is a very specific signifier, indicating that the action's ideal vantage lies elsewhere—and wherever the spectator stands it will always lie elsewhere. Whereas *The Way of the World's* specular arrangements identify the Individual, *The Castle of Perseverance's* 'map' (and the resulting traversal of the spectator's sight) places the viewer outside its gaze of knowledge, renders him/her

known but not knowing. Indeed, the only vantage from which a complete vision of the play's movements would have been possible was a bird's-eye view, so that, in contrast to the modern bi-polar epistemology, *The Castle of Perseverance* demands a triangulated gaze, in which the bird's-eye view is the reference point and the human subject's knowledge is always incomplete. The fifteenth century play personifies Catholic theology, gives form to that which is never visible to mere human beings. Thus the view that is presumed by both the narrative and the stage plan is of the celestial order incarnate. It is God's own vantage that, being by definition impossible to adopt, is represented instead by that very impossibility. Far from being a flaw, the limitation of vision is a key element of the specular mechanism, as are the borders of the picture frame. As the frame reflects the bounded unity of the Individual, so the unattainable, omniscient viewpoint infers Mankind's limitation and incapacity within a world that is suffused by the unknowable divine.

What we see, then, are two different forms of gaze, each entirely specific to its source culture. The historical modern period came to be dominated by a conceptual frame whose diverse components found their nexus in an early modern form of theatre, a form which posits the very model of human subjectivity that underwrites them all; humanist Individuals populate both the stage and the auditorium. Fifteenth century England offered quite different orders of knowledge, but these too are reproduced both in our chosen play's narrative, and in its mode of staging and the specular relationship that results from it. Just as the temporal existence of Mankind is determined by celestial forces, so the spectator is made aware that the play's perspective is beyond his/her earthly one. Just as the social subject can only be known to him/herself via the mediation of the Catholic church, the audience is placed in a spatio-visual position that signifies its own existential incapacity. The subject position offered the viewer in both theatres is an analogue of the model of the human subject that is the viewed.

Notes

1. The function of display in relation to premodern strategies of power is examined in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

2. Michael R. Kelly, *Flamboyant Drama: A Study of The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind and Wisdom* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois UP, 1979).

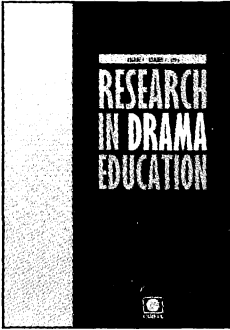
3. See Nicola Coldstream's essay "Art and Architecture in the Late Middle Ages" in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Metcalf (London: Methuen, 1981).

4. The gaze is most comprehensively addressed in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. However an interesting introduction is to be found in "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (London: The Harvester Press, 1980).

5. Robert W. Ackerman, *Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature* (New York: Random House, 1966).
6. Ackerman.
7. See Louis Althusser's "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984).
8. For a stimulating description of Carnival culture and its oppositional status, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), and also Michael Bristol's *Carnival and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1990).
9. V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford UP, 1976).
10. Michael Kelly, *Flamboyant Drama*.
11. Richard Southern, *Medieval Theatre in the Round* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957 [revised edition 1975]).
12. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985).
13. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, trans. Robert Schwarz (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978).
14. See, for instance, Stanley J. Kahrl's explanation of this view in *Traditions of Medieval Drama* (London: Hutchinson 1974).
15. Michel de Certeau, "Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo" in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986).
16. Natalie Crohn Schmitt, "Was There a Medieval Theatre in the Round? A Re-examination of the Evidence," in *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972).

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Volume 1 - 1996 (2 issues) ISSN 1356-9783

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